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Apartment developers using art to entice renters



Molly Glentzer, Staff writer

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Adela Andea's "The Great Barrier Reef" hangs from the lobby ceiling at the new Drewery Place luxury high-rise in midtown Houston, Tuesday, July 2, 2019.

Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Yoga studio, check. Coffee bar, check. Rec room and rooftop pool, check. Public art, new check.

Competition for tenants in Houston's multi-family residential market – the nation's third largest – has made a long list of lifestyle amenities *de rigeur* for new apartment and condominium complexes. So perhaps it wasn't entirely out of the blue, but this summer a noticeable number of developers began touting their projects as art-centric, targeting millennial tenants in the city's urban core.

“It sounds crass, but it's experiences per square foot,” said art consultant Lea Weingarten. “Millennials are demanding personalized, non-generic experiences, and public art is a powerful way to deliver that.”

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America's appetite for public art has led to the reinvention of blighted urban areas. Commercial real estate developers are doing either. Apartment developers in cities like Chicago and New York City have a diverse and deep art community to capitalize on.

For over a decade, fed by the need for people magnets, the collecting game, picking up; and in Houston,

"We are beginning to see it in other cities, but Houston is certainly at the forefront," Weingarten said.

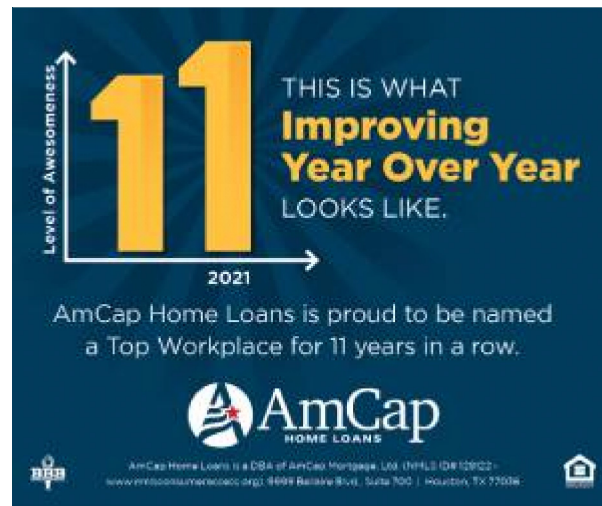
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The trend is most evident in the murals, dazzling lobby installations and in-house galleries of several Midtown highrises whose developers have commissioned art and are incubating vibrant, arts-oriented street scenes. But the renovation of a modest, traditional complex in Spring Branch has the potential to inspire profound change: Come this winter, the Zócalo Apartments at 8787 Hammerly will launch one of the nation's first commercial artist-in-residence programs.

Not everyone wants to make art, “but everybody loves a more vibrant, lively environment,” said Sophia Collier, one of the Zócalo investors. “And that’s something artists bring.”

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‘Colorful, energetic vibe’

Collier’s group, based in California, hasn’t ruled out creating residencies at three additional, older Houston complexes it is upgrading, but the plan made sense at the former Hammerly Walk property because a tennis court at its center looked like a prison yard, Collier said. She envisioned a new clubhouse that would feel like “it really is somewhere, not just a cookie-cutter place.”

That part of the rationale echoes at Drewery Place, a new high-rise that opened in early July at 2850 Fannin. “We don’t want to create places where people just shower and sleep,” said Emma Alexander, sales and marketing manager for Caydon USA, the American arm of the Australian developer. “We want places where people can be proud to live, that are welcoming and comfortable when they come home. The elements of art play into that, along with other trends like wellness, in upping the

game with amenities.”

Working with the Houston Arts Alliance, which set up a democratic open call for artist submissions, Caydon commissioned 56 works from 28 area artists to display across the public areas of Drewery Place’s residential floors, lobby and garage. The company wanted art with a colorful, energetic vibe.

Well-known Houston artist Adela Andea created “Barrier Reef,” the massive sculptural light installation that brings the lobby to life, especially at night, when its glow can be seen from the street.

Newcomer Patricia Barrera painted the triptych of murals that greets people as they enter the parking garage. Her vivid layers of imagery depict native plants, migrating birds and butterflies, and geometric symbols. “I was thinking of sanctuary, that refuge we call home,” Barrera said. “More of a feeling than a place.”

John Abodeely, Houston Arts Alliance CEO, said his group employed the same process it uses to provide the city with candidates for public art projects. Caydon’s project was its first commercial collaboration.

“The most important thing to HAA is that corporate developers have more engagement with local artists,” Abodeely said. “We are not the only game in town offering it, but we can facilitate it easily and affordably.” Commissions also feed the local artist ecosystem, he added. “It’s a win all around.”

Melbourne to Houston

Drewery Place is the first of five high-rises that will comprise Caydon’s three-block Laneways district, bounded by Fannin, Tuam, Main and McGowen Streets. Alexander said Caydon principal Joe Russo, who is from Melbourne, Australia, also scouted

locations in Dallas, Atlanta, Seattle and Los Angeles for his first U.S. project. But Houston was chosen when Russo saw Midtown Park under construction a few years ago, along with other fundamentals for his investment, including light rail and population growth.

Laneways is named for a popular area of transformed pedestrian alleyways in inner Melbourne that bustle with cafes, clubs and boutiques. Murals, light installations and sculpture will also be part of the new public, street-level retail area Caydon plans, Alexander said. “We wanted to bring in that Laneways culture, and a big element is art.”

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Houstonian Bob Schultz, the developer of the Mid Main district along the 3500-3700 blocks of Main Street, is happy to see Caydon arrive. The handful of free-spirited, locally-owned businesses he has supported during the past 19 years – such as the record shop Sig’s Lagoon and the boutique My Flaming Heart – need “density of people” to survive, he said.

He and his wife Lane Schultz have been supporters of the arts in Houston for years – not just in their business projects but also as board members of organizations such as the Orange Show and Aurora Picture Show. “We’ve been at it a long time, doing it for the right reasons,” he said.

Schultz bought his first Midtown property 1999 across the street from the Ensemble Theatre, a long-time Midtown institution. With partners Pete Gordon and Steve Wertheimer, he created a home and a suitable environment for Houston’s Continental Club, an offshoot of Wertheimer’s legendary Austin music venue. That begat the first shops and cafes, and the Mid Main District grew a few blocks after Schultz bought the 3600 and 3700 blocks in 2008. The Alley Theatre’s original home is in the mix, being

used for events, and he built 357-unit Mid Main Lofts in 2016 next door to the new Midtown Arts and Theater Center (whose land purchase he underwrote).

“Not many developers would have built up around those old buildings. It’s art of the place,” Schultz said. “We were the forgotten end of Main Street for a long time. We’re creating a community of people.”

The loft building’s lobby doubles as an art gallery and has a tribute corner devoted to the Continental Club featuring photographs by Jay Lee, whose work also hangs in the management offices. Schultz and his wife, Lane, often end up buying work and display it, along with other art from their personal collection, in the building. Lane Schultz also helped incubate the non-profit Main Street Projects, a collaborative of young artists whose work often appears in the street-level windows.

In addition to all that largesse, Smith took a big bet by planning Mid Main Lofts with the lower incomes of creative tenants in mind; 220 of his 357 units are 512-square foot studio spaces that rent for about \$1,200 monthly.

With Mid-Main 96-98 percent leased, he hopes to make his next project – on ground he leases from Trinity Church – even more affordable, especially now that the city has passed a market-based parking ordinance that will allow him to devote less space to a garage. “That helps significantly,” he said. “Parking garages are expensive.”

Alternative to galleries

Rents at the Zócalo, the old-style Spring Branch complex, start at \$900, and three live-in artists will pay nothing. The residency program at the ten-acre, 237-unit complex will provide a year’s lease to one artist annually and back-to-back six-month residencies to two others; also giving them exhibit space.

Ileana Yordan, the Zócalo's full-time program manager, hopes to see a mix of murals, installations, painting, sculpture and multi-media works on the property – art that can be interactive and – like Schultz's enterprises – engage the community beyond the complex. “We want to create a sense of place and an environment where art is part of everyday life,” she said. “It's not self-serving. We want it to have an outward focus.”

Art is also a selling point at the other end of the spectrum, for empty nesters who can afford \$2 million condos at the River Oaks, a redeveloped 18-story project on Westheimer. Lea Weingarten, the consultant, worked more than three years with the developer, Arel Capital, and designer Lauren Rottet to build an art collection for common areas that fits the building's contemporary spirit. While their buying spree included jaunts to art fairs in Miami and New York, they also commissioned or bought work from a number of nationally-known locals including Paul Kremer, Gael Stack, Manual and Shaun O'Dell.

“Consultants now have a seat at the table with landscape architects and the design team,” Weingarten said. “It's not just an afterthought when they realize they have an empty green space to fill.” The art has been so popular, she added, that realtors now ask her to give art tours around the property to prospective buyers.

At any level, it's all good news for Houston's artists. “The gallery system isn't functioning the way it used to,” said David A. Brown, from whom Schultz commissioned three photography-based conceptual pieces at Mid Main Lofts. Brown said at least a third of his art sales are corporate, including recent commissions from the Four Seasons Hotel and the Greater Houston Partnership.

Buying work is a great thing, said artist Selven O'Keef Jarmon, “but it doesn't go far enough.” One of the first tenants of Mid Main Lofts, he lives austere in one of the studio spaces and is grateful developers like Schultz exist. He had a show in the lobby

gallery recently, and several of his drawings hang in common areas

“Artists are constantly priced out of spaces they’re in,” he said. “There should be a way to extend the conversation. I’m constantly bringing people here to see my work, and they see the nice courtyard. I did a show and talk in the gallery that were both packed with the kind of people who don’t come here often – the kind of people a

developer would want. Imagine what would happen if that were done throughout the city. It would transform the art scene.”

molly.glentzer@chron.com

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Written By
Molly Glentzer

Reach Molly on  

Molly Glentzer, a staff arts critic since 1998, writes mostly about dance and visual arts but can go anywhere a good story leads. Through covering public art in parks, she developed a beat focused on Houston's emergence as one of the nation's leading "green renaissance" cities.

During about 30 years as a journalist Molly has also written for periodicals, including Texas Monthly, Saveur, Food & Wine, Dance Magazine and Dance International. She collaborated with her husband, photographer Don Glentzer, to create "Pink Ladies & Crimson Gents: Portraits and

Legends of 50 Roses" (2008, Clarkson Potter), a book about the human culture behind rose horticulture. This explains the occasional gardening story byline and her broken fingernails.

A Texas native, Molly grew up in Houston and has lived not too far away in the bucolic town of Brenham since 2012.

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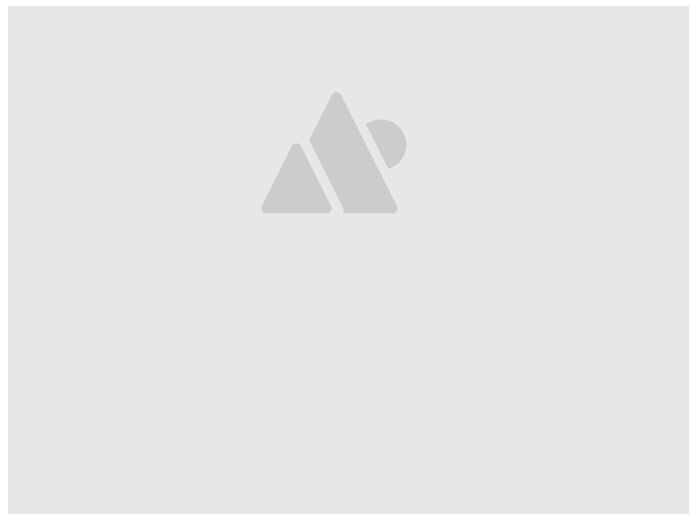
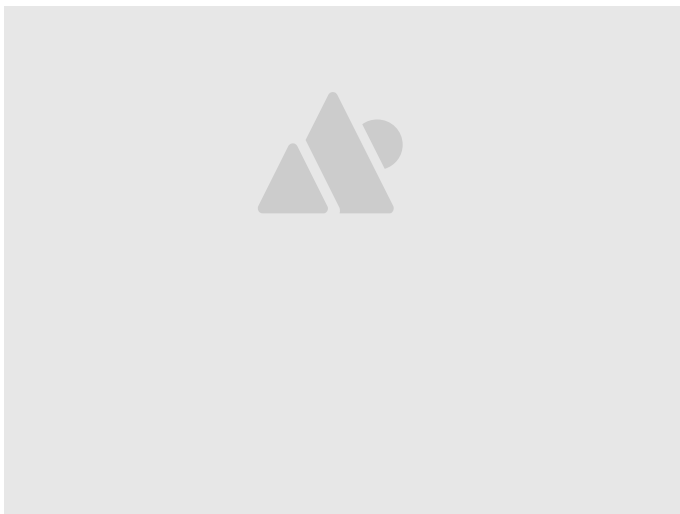
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Abandoned

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≡ BY ANNA BAUMAN, NICOLE HENSLEY, ALEJANDRO SERRANO

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